

Harvest Moon by orphan_account

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Summary:

A series of one shots spanning Joyce and Hopper's relationship inspired by the lyrics of Harvest Moon by Neil Young.

1. Dream

*Come a little bit closer,
hear what I have to say.
Just like children sleeping,
we could dream this night away.*

Hopper rounds the corner and ducks under the steps, taking a moment to survey the area before he lumbers toward Joyce.

“How the hell are you so small?”

Joyce is sitting down against the wall, knees hugged to her chest. She looks up and bites her lip, feigning deep thought. “Biology? Genetics? Ever heard of it?”

Tapping the box of cigarettes against his palm, he slides down the wall to sit beside her. “Sounds familiar.” He lets her choose the cigarette, playfully rolling his eyes when she pretends like it’s a major decision to be made. He lights the end with practiced precision once the chosen one is resting between her lips.

Joyce takes a long drag, smoke tickling her lungs. Everyone smokes but she often thinks about how they usually do it to seem cool. She does it because her hands shake and something within her creeps up, something that is only extinguished by nicotine. Probably another case of genetics.

Hopper plucks the cigarette from her thin fingers and places it in the corner of his mouth, speaking around it. “What’s wrong?” He nudges her shoulder and she startles a little, her head lolling toward him as she blows smoke into his face.

“Do you think we’ll ever use the quadratic formula in real life?”

Hopper huffs out a laugh, smoke flying out with it. “I know that we won’t.” He passes the cigarette back to her and they sit in silence for a few moments. “My parents are out of town this weekend. Same time?”

A glowing ember is tapped onto the concrete before them. They watch it fizzle out as the distinct sound of teachers get closer to their hideout. Joyce stubs out the cigarette against the brick wall and quickly gets up, yanking at Hopper’s hand and urging him to stand so they can make a speedy escape.

Hopper pulls her back down instead, bringing his knees up to rest his elbows on, mirroring the position he had found Joyce in just minutes earlier and effectively blocking her from sight. A pair of heeled footsteps pass them by without any notice, the voices to match complaining about smartass kids who think they know how the world works.

Joyce slaps the back of her hand into Hopper’s chest once the coast is clear. “We could’ve made it. What if they saw us?” She hisses but takes his hand anyway and is pulled to her feet.

“You’re so small they wouldn’t even see you. And me?” He grins at her with that dumb smile that gets him out of a lot of things. “They don’t care what I do.”

“Smartass.” She pushes by, leaving him behind. “I’ll see you later.”

The bus stops on the main street and Joyce has a 15 minute walk down the dirt road until she gets to her house. No one else lives on her stretch so she enjoys the quiet walk. Hopper promises her that he’ll drive her home every day next year, he’s certain that his dad will pass his old car down to him and they’ll be able to drive wherever they want, whenever they want.

Winter has reared its ugly head and retreated back into the darkness. The sounds of spring accompany Joyce as she kicks a rock along the way, stops to pet Mrs. Mathers dog at the dingy white picket fence, and eventually makes it to her house. There's an extra car in the driveway and Joyce falters a little. She recognizes the car immediately and debates turning back around to start the long walk to Hopper's, but the front door flies open before she gives it too much thought.

"Joyce? Is that you?"

The man is holding his hand above his eyes in an attempt to block the sun as he steps off the porch. Joyce really wants to make a run for it but she rolls her shoulders back and proceeds down the driveway.

"Uncle Frank, I didn't know you were in town!" She puts on a false tone of excitement. She couldn't care less about the man. He wasn't an actual relative, just an old friend of her dad who dropped in every now and then, bringing with him a slew of unforgiving qualities that brought out the worst in her parents.

He jogs down the driveway and meets her halfway with a whistle. "Sweet, little Joyce. Would you look at that." He slowly circles her with a wandering gaze and stops in front of her, placing his hands on his hips. "You've grown quite a bit since I've seen you last."

Joyce clutches her books to her chest and bites her tongue. She was feeling uneasy under his gaze and wanted to yell at him and make a run for it. Instead of spitting some smart line that would definitely get her in trouble, Joyce smiles and starts heading for the front door. She gasps when he catches her arm and pulls her back to him.

"Aren't you forgetting something, little Joyce?" His grip tightens and she so badly wants to kick him where it counts but he's much stronger than her and she doesn't know how well she would fair. She instead gives in and places a kiss on his cheek, something she has done ever since she was a little girl, long before he started looking at her differently, watching her every move with narrowed eyes.

He slings his arm around her shoulder and leads her along, stopping

at his car to get a tattered duffel bag out of his backseat. "I was passing through and decided to stop and say hello. Your mom called your dad and I'm welcome to stay for the weekend. Isn't that nice?" He squeezes her a little tighter, as if trying to force the words out of her.

"Real nice." Joyce mutters. He smells like he took a dip in a pool of vodka and her shoulder is damp where his underarm is resting. Her skin crawls and she wishes she had walked home a little slower, maybe she wouldn't have landed herself in this situation. He wouldn't try anything in front of her mom. At least she thinks. Speaking of her mom, the door opens once more as she and Frank are stepping foot onto the porch.

"Oh, sweetheart!" She rushes forward and takes Joyce into her arms. She too smells like a liquor store and Joyce rolls her eyes. She doesn't know how long Frank has been in their house but he has already started his conquest. "I was hoping to surprise you, but I guess Frank ruined it! I certainly was surprised!" Her mother giggles like a child when she releases Joyce from her bone crushing hug and places her hands on her shoulders, shaking Joyce as she speaks. "Oh, I missed you so much, honey! Did you have a good day at school?"

Joyce nods as she's dragged back into the house with Frank following close behind.

Hopper drives past Joyce's driveway and continues down the dirt road for a little until he's about a half mile away. He's surprised to see she isn't already there as tardiness is one of his many qualities. He doesn't pull up to her house because he knows her parents would rat him out for driving around in a car that wasn't even his. Benny had been fixing up this truck for fun and lent it to him for the weekend.

He gets out to sit in the bed of it while he waits for Joyce. He's always been a little jealous of her neighborhood, if you could call it

that. The Hoppers live in a cul de sac with nosy people that always have something to say. He likes the idea of living away from town with an acre or two between you and your closest neighbor.

When they were younger, Joyce and Hopper would stomp through the woods together playing make believe and enjoying the fresh air and freedom that came with miles of untouched land. He much preferred it to his backyard where his mother would often tell them to keep it down or else the neighbors would complain.

Thirty minutes and a cigarette later, Hopper gets back into the truck to drive by Joyce's again. It's getting dark and he doesn't want her walking alone. He turns the car around and drives for a few seconds before he sees her off in the distance. The car rolls to a stop alongside Joyce, who has her arm extended, thumb up in clear sight.

Hopper leans out of the window and nods. "Where you headed?" Joyce rushes around to the other side of the truck, climbs in, and tosses her bag in the back. She slumps in the seat as Hopper accelerates down the road, dust flying and gravel crunching as they go.

"Sorry, I know you were waiting for a while." She sighs and runs her hands through her hair, sitting back up to switch the radio station. "Frank's in town."

Hopper comes to a stop at the end of the road. "Are you okay?" She's still twisting the dials but he knows she's just playing with the radio to distract herself. He puts the car in park and pulls her hand from the controls. "Hey."

Joyce looks to him with a smile. "It's fine, Hop. Keep driving." When he doesn't, she shakes her head and looks over his shoulder, focusing on a mailbox in the distance as she lets go of his hand. "Dad had to work late and I couldn't leave my mom alone with Frank. She was already three sheets to the wind when I got home from school." She turns back in her seat to face forward. "I don't trust him."

Clenching his jaw, Hopper shifts back into drive and turns onto the main road, gripping the steering wheel so tight his knuckles pale.

“Where did they go this time?” Joyce grabs a glass from the cabinet and accepts the pitcher of lemonade from Hopper who turns back to riffle through the fridge some more.

“Visiting my great aunt.” He produces two pale yellow tupperware containers and places them on the counter. “I never met her so I didn’t have to go.” They’re meticulously labeled because his mom doesn’t trust him to not burn down the house or starve even though he can easily manage warming up food. “Okay, so we have,” he reads the labels and raises the corresponding tupperware, “chicken and broccoli casserole or lasagna.”

Joyce gives him a knowing look and he laughs. “I was going to make it anyway. Just wanted to give you options.” He preheats the oven and finds a dish to slide the lasagna into. He feels her eyes on him as he moves around the kitchen. “What?”

“How come your mom always makes lasagna when they go out of town?” She already knows the answer.

Hopper shrugs as he grabs the glass from her hands and takes a sip. “Because it’s your favorite.”

An hour later, Joyce spreads a comforter out in the backyard while Hopper takes their plates back inside. She thinks about what her parents are doing back at her house and feels so relieved that she can stay here while Frank wreaks havoc. They won’t care that she’s not around, they won’t even notice that she’s gone.

She wonders if the Hoppers know that she spends most of her time here when they’re out of town. They’re not stupid. But they do like her which is good. They’ve known her for years. And though they’d never mention it, they know that Joyce has to escape her home for a little bit every now and then.

“Flo just came to the door.” Hopper pads through the grass barefoot

and offers Joyce one of his sweaters because she always gets cold when they do this. “She was wondering whose truck was parked in the driveway.” He plops down beside Joyce, stretching all his limbs out like a starfish. “She said she won’t tell my mom. I don’t know why she does that.”

Joyce laughs as she pulls the sweater on, the fabric drowning her and smelling so distinctly of Hopper. “Because she wants to make sure her friend’s son is safe while she’s away.” She lies down beside him, resting her head on his arm and scooting closer until she can feel his warmth. “You’d do the same thing.”

Hopper looks down at her and then back up at the sky. The stars are so bright against the blackness, illuminating the night. “I won’t have a son to keep an eye on.”

“A daughter?”

Hopper shakes his head. “No kids. They’re too much trouble.”

He says it so seriously that Joyce can’t help but laugh. “Hop, you are a kid.”

“Exactly,” he says as he pulls her closer, “first hand experience. I can’t deal with a mini me.” He sighs and counts the stars for a little, Joyce drawing patterns across his chest. “I just want to live my life, you know? Get out of Hawkins and explore the world. See what’s out there.”

Joyce hums at his side. “Yeah, I think everyone wants to get out of here.” A majority of the high school students in their small town feel that way. The rest are either content to live it out in rural Indiana or scared. Scared of the unknown.

“Do you?”

Joyce glances up at Hopper, catches his stare, and sits up. He rolls over on his side, propping his head up with his hand as he waits for her to speak. She breaks away from his gaze and balls the fabric of the sweater into her fists. “I don’t know.” Her voice is so quiet. “Don’t know if I could.”

“What do you mean?” Hopper frowns.

“I don’t know.” She lies back down and closes her eyes. “I would if I could.”

“Joyce, I don’t get what you’re saying.” Now Hopper is the one sitting up, staring down at her, and urging her to help him understand.

“Yes you do, Hop. I know you do. How am I going to get out of here? With what? My charm and good looks? Is that how I’m gonna do it?” She props herself up on her elbows and blinks at him. “Some people just don’t make it out, you know?”

Hopper’s mouth hangs open but it presses into a hard line before he speaks. “You’ll make it out. We’ll make it out of here. I’ll make sure you get out of here.”

The words come out with such insistence that she wants to believe him. She knows she’s being dramatic and all too introspective for a Friday night, but she’s always thinking about what comes next for her. How she’ll make her move into the adult world after they graduate high school or if she’ll even make it there at all.

She laughs to try and lighten the mood. “Don’t make promises you can’t keep, Jim Hopper.”

He doesn’t give in though. Stares at her with those blue eyes. Communicating to her that he means it. “You think I’m joking? Because I’m not, Joyce. That falls on you. You know that I mean it.”

And she does. Joyce reaches out to him and he lies by her side once again. She rolls on top of him, pressing her bony elbows into his chest to look down at him as he speaks. He closes his arms around her and shifts a little.

“We’ll move to the city. Work for a year or two. Save up some money. And then we’ll travel. See the world. Be strangers in new places. Live our lives.”

Joyce places her hands on either side of Hopper’s face and smiles down at him. He’s searching her eyes for confirmation that she doesn’t think he’s crazy. She leans down and presses a light kiss to his

lips before wrapping her arms around him, burying her face in the crook his neck.

“We can do it, Joyce.” She feels the words rumble in his chest. “You and me.”

She’s not sure that it’s possible, but it’s nice to dream.

2. Strangers

When we were strangers,

I watched you from afar.

Jim Hopper was utterly impressed at how easy their trip had gone so far. The hardest part was over as he, his wife, and one year old daughter followed the sea of people toward baggage claim. Hopper worried for Diane, who was a nervous flyer, and Sara, who hadn't even left the city of New York before. Every stewardess crowded around Diane and Sara upon exiting the plane, cooing at the baby and telling her how well behaved she was.

Hopper hoists the diaper bag higher up on his shoulder and slides an arm around Diane's waist, pressing a kiss to her temple. He peeks over the canopy of Sara's yellow and white pinstriped stroller to see his daughter kicking her legs in the air and happily gurgling.

"So far, so good, right?" Diane smiles at her husband as they stop at their flight's designated baggage carousel.

The bags were already tumbling down the ramp and Hopper was surprised at the speed of it all. He always expected the worst when it came to travel. Traveling during this time of year was a completely different story.

"Right." Hopper keeps his eye on the identical suitcases as they make their rounds, looking out for bright blue yarn wrapped around the handles to indicate which bags were theirs. "One long car ride and it's home for the holidays."

This is the first time Hopper is bringing his wife and daughter to Hawkins, to his childhood home, to the town that would always be a part of him.

"I'm excited." Diane points down to their daughter who has graduated to squawks of joy. "I think Sara is too."

"So am I," Hopper says with a laugh. "And my mom couldn't stop talking about finally getting you girls out here."

"She has to say that." Diane counters as she bends down to grab the stuffed tiger that Sara has chucked from her stroller.

Jim and Diane's relationship progressed quickly. They got engaged, married, and had Sara all in the same year after six months of dating. His parents hadn't spent much time with Diane but they seemed to like her and were over the moon that she brought their first grandchild into the world. That wasn't enough for Diane though, still unsure of where she stood with her in-laws.

"Oh, come on. They love you!"

Diane raises her thin pointer finger in the air. "Like, Jim. They like me."

Hopper is about to start the regularly scheduled conversation about whether or not his parents love her when a loud whistle cuts through the airport. Almost everyone startles and looks in the direction of the noise and Hopper shakes his head with a chuckle when he spots the culprit.

His dad is wiping his hands on his jeans as his mom makes a beeline toward them, one hand placed over her heart, the other waving ecstatically.

"Oh, honey! Jim! Oh, you look so good!" Anne Hopper collides with her son, practically taking him to the ground, and crushing him in her frail arms. "How was the flight?" She steps back and smooths the wrinkles of his shirt. "Oh, I can't believe you're here!"

She then pulls Diane in for a quick hug. "How was the first flight with your baby? Not too much crying I hope!"

"From her? No. Jim on the other hand-"

A gruff laugh cuts her off as George Hopper joins the group.

"Sounds about right." He nods at Diane and steps up to Hopper. "Son."

"How was the drive over? Roads clear?"

"For the most part." He claps his son on the shoulder. "How was the flight over? Skies clear?"

Anne has already managed to get Sara out of the stroller and into her arms. "Hello, sweet angel! Can you say nana? I know you can! Nana!" Sara happily babbles nonsense at her grandma, tugging on the shiny necklaces in front of her.

"Oh, Jim! Our bags!"

Hopper spots their two suitcases and reaches for one as his dad grabs the other.

"Don't worry, Dad, I got it."

"Son, let me."

"No really, it's fine."

"It's one bag, let me get it."

Anne clears her throat pointedly, drawing the attention of her husband and son. "If you two don't figure it out, us ladies will be leaving without you." And with that, she turns and walks away from the scene.

The holiday traffic doubled the hour long drive back to Hawkins. Hopper sat in the passenger seat, his mother insisting on sitting in the back with Diane and Sara, occasionally looking over his shoulder to see his wife snickering as his mother whispered things to her. It was reassuring to see two of the women he cared the most about bonding with his daughter snoring away between them.

It was actually Diane's idea to make the trip out to Hawkins. Hopper was unsure if Sara was ready to do so much traveling, but Diane ensured him that the doctor said she was perfectly fine to fly. He almost scoffs thinking about it now, the quack saying if newborn

babies can do it, then so can Sara.

Diane's family lives in upstate New York so they are more readily accessible than the Hoppers. Diane always asks Hopper about what it was like growing up in the midwest, painting pictures of wheat fields and overalls as she imagined what her husband was like as a young boy. Hopper knew it was only a matter of time before she got her way and found out for herself.

Christmas in Hawkins was something else. As they drive down Main Street, they pass lamp posts wrapped in strings of lights, window displays with snowy villages, and the occasional novelty sized bow adorning the entrance to a shop. Hopper feels the nostalgia set in as they pass through the familiar landscape.

The last time he was here was when he had no place else to go. His new life away from Hawkins was abruptly ended when a piece of paper called him overseas to fight a war that wasn't his to wage in. Two years later he found himself back in his hometown, where people knew him far too well, yet somehow didn't know him at all. A man changed by things they couldn't possibly imagine.

His father understood the suffocating feeling of small town familiarity so the Hoppers traveled to Jim, meeting him halfway or in whatever city he called home at the time.

"George, we have to stop at the supermarket. I forgot the potatoes."

His mother's voice brings him back to the present and he sits a little taller in the leather seat. Hopper looks back at Diane, who is gazing out the window with a small smile on her lips, watching the little shops of downtown pass them by. It's almost bizarre to see her here, away from the usual setting of their shared life and dropped into the one of his past.

A few moments later they pull into the Big Buy lot and Hopper makes his way around to the trunk to get the stroller. Sara is still sleeping soundly as Diane unbuckles her from her car seat and though Hopper had offered to stay in the car with their daughter, Diane insisted on experiencing a grocery trip in Hawkins, Indiana with her whole family.

As Diane situates Sara in the stroller, Hopper suddenly feels overwhelmed. He can't place exactly why. Just hours before, the thought of sharing his hometown with his daughter and wife sounded ideal, but now he wanted nothing more than to be on a plane back to New York.

Diane notices how spacey Hopper has become and places a cool hand on his cheek. She searches his eyes as he fakes a cough and joins their hands, bringing them down to hang between them.

"Headache." Hopper waves at his mom, telling her to follow his dad who was already stepping foot into the store. "Go on in, I'm right behind you."

"Are you sure?" She squeezes his hand before reluctantly letting go when he nods at her with a smile. Diane sees her breath materialize as she lets out a little sigh and pushes the stroller toward the entrance of the store, stopping to check on her husband one last time, his back already turned to her.

Hopper's fingers are tingling. He gave up smoking as soon as Diane told him she was pregnant and hasn't given it much thought since then, but in this moment, he craves that burn in his lungs. He wonders if his dad has any cigarettes in the glove box as a car abruptly screeches to a halt.

"Would you tell your son to watch where he's going?!"

Hopper instantly recognizes the voice and steps out from behind the car to see Lonnie Byers pushing a young boy back onto the sidewalk and wave at the driver to go on their way. There were two people that he didn't want to see on this trip and he was already one for two.

The young boy is blocking the view of who Hopper assumes to be his mother. The woman is crouched down and gripping the boy's arm with one hand while balancing another child, who resembled a blue marshmallow in a giant parka, on her hip. Lonnie has already disappeared, probably off to cause trouble somewhere else when the woman stands up and smooths the older boy's hair down.

Hopper's breath catches in his throat and he quickly steps back behind the car as if it offers decent cover.

Two for two.

Joyce Byers looks exactly the same as she did all those years ago. Sure the bags under her eyes were more pronounced and she had two children by her side, but she is still as beautiful as he remembers. Hopper's mother would often slip little updates about Joyce into their conversations that he wouldn't actively acknowledge, but was still glad to hear. He knew his mother was still very fond of the girl she had seen grow into the woman who now stands outside this supermarket.

"Joyce! Let's go!"

Hopper hears Lonnie yell out followed by a car horn blaring. Joyce bends down to say something to the older boy who walks over to the cart full of shopping bags, Joyce stepping up behind him, her free hand resting on the handle as her son, who can't even see over the cart, pushes it toward their car.

Hopper shakes his head at the sight. His mom had told him about Joyce's sons but never spoke of their father. He knew though. Of course it was Lonnie. He figures that's his fault and he deserves seeing her with someone else. But Joyce doesn't deserve being stuck with Lonnie. And neither do her boys. Lonnie wasn't even decent enough to help bring out the groceries, leaving his wife whose hands are literally full and their son, who can't be more than six years old, to deal with things themselves.

Hopper turns around and leans against the car, pressing the heels of his hands into his eyes. This place was already too much and he had a week ahead of him. He thinks of his own family, of his loving wife and their beautiful daughter. There's no use dwelling on the past but he hopes that Joyce and her boys are doing well. Hopes that she still has the fire of her younger self raging within her. Hopes that those boys are their mother's sons and not anything like their no good father. He waits until their car peels out of the parking lot before heading into the supermarket himself.

Word travels fast in Hawkins. As soon as news broke that Jim Hopper's daughter was sick with cancer, Joyce fought the urge to drive herself over to the Hoppers and ask for his number. It had been several long years since Joyce had spoken to Hopper, no need for their lives to converge after they moved forward without one another, but she feels the need to reach out.

Anne Hopper had excitedly told Joyce she was expecting a granddaughter upon bumping into each other at the furniture store. Anne was looking at the cribs, reminiscing about the days when she was expecting her first born.

Joyce was genuinely excited for the woman, knowing full well how great of a grandmother she would be. She politely asked about Hopper's wife and any names they were considering for the baby. She even agreed with feigned enthusiasm that Hopper's unborn daughter should have play dates with Joyce's youngest, Will, who was just four months old at the time, whenever they would come visit.

Joyce tunes out the chatter of the customers at work, all of them tutting about how tragic it is that poor Jimmy Hopper was going to lose his daughter to cancer. Everyone always spoke of how the young girl was going to die, people who didn't even know her name or care that they were gossiping about a child.

The bell above the door jingles and the women that Joyce is currently handing change to fall silent as they see who is now perusing the aisles. They quickly collect their bags and hurry out of the store, leaving it empty except for Joyce and George Hopper.

Joyce watches the man pick up random items and examine them, his heavy brow furrowing with intense concentration. She thinks of a teenage Hopper who would get irritated whenever Joyce pointed out how much he looked like his father when he did the same exact thing. She picks up the book she's currently reading and leaves him to browse in peace until he eventually makes it up to the register.

“Joyce.” He says with a faint smile.

“How are you, Mr. Hopper? You find everything alright?” He doesn’t have anything in his hands, but she avoids asking about the obvious because she knows he’s tired of hearing it from everyone else.

“Just fine, thank you.”

Joyce has known this man for most of her life. It’s odd to think of time and how it changes everyone. She recognizes the same man from her childhood, but the years sit heavily on his shoulders. She has watched him slowly age, just like her own parents. Once standing tall, he is now slightly hunched and moves slower with every passing day.

“How are your boys?”

“Good, my youngest-” She was about to share that Will is entering the first grade in the fall, but then thought it would be inappropriate since Sara couldn’t even finish kindergarten, living her life from inside a hospital room. “They’re good.”

George acknowledges what she says with a polite hum but is clearly somewhere else. He clears his throat before he speaks again.

“He thinks it’s his fault.”

Joyce is comfortable talking about the elephant in the room as long as it’s on his terms.

“It isn’t.”

The older man lets out a weak laugh, one that’s laced with all the hurt in his heart. “I wish he knew that.” They stand in silence for a few moments. “I actually just dropped Anne off at the airport. Couldn’t stand being out of the loop. It’s not looking very good.”

“I’m sorry.” And she really means it. Joyce wouldn’t wish this on anyone. What do you do when the threat of losing your child looms above you? What do you do as the parents of someone who is going to lose their baby? Joyce pictures the little girl she’s seen in wallet sized photographs, blonde hair and blue eyes, two front teeth

missing. She then thinks of her youngest son, older than Hopper's daughter by a sliver and her heart breaks all over again.

"Me too."

A few months later, Jim Hopper is back in Hawkins. A daughter lost to a terrible disease. A wife lost to the tragedy of it all. The rumor mill churning once again about the impending divorce, countless people lacking the decency to respect the former couple who just lost their child.

Joyce never contributes to any conversations and often has to bite her tongue to stop herself from jumping to the Hoppers' defense. She never met Diane or Sara but they don't deserve to be spoken about by people who didn't know them either.

She wonders how Hopper is adjusting, if at all. She can't imagine possessing any shred of sanity if she were in his shoes. Joyce knows him. Or knew him. As a teenager, Jim Hopper cared to a fault, his intense feelings often breaking him down before building him back up. He played at nonchalance and indifference, but his passion was the fuel behind many blow ups.

She thinks back to a time when they dreamed of what would come of their lives, of a boy who thought he had it all figured out and made promises to her that he didn't keep. They were young and innocent. Untouched by the harsh realities of their futures: broken marriages and unfair deaths.

Hopper didn't even want children. But things change and he met a woman that made him want to be a father, only for the universe to make a cruel joke, laugh in his face, and steal his daughter from him. Joyce hopes that even after all that happened, he doesn't regret it. Regret his daughter and his wife, the life that they briefly shared together.

Joyce is glad to hear that Hopper is stepping in as chief of police. At least he will have something to keep his mind off of things. She wonders where he's staying because she knows he would feel claustrophobic living with his parents in the wake of everything.

From what she gathers, he's been back for about a week. She hasn't seen him once but Joyce rarely veers off the course of school, work, and home. She knows it's only a matter of time before he comes into the store, whether for official business or to pick something up, but she decides to cross that bridge when she gets there.

It's a particularly sunny day for October and Joyce decides to take her break early. Donald was swamped in the backroom and there was a new hire who had experience on the register, so she didn't feel bad extending her break by a few minutes.

She'd often spend her short break in her car and recline her seat all the way back in an attempt to stretch out her muscles and ease the nagging pain in her lower back.

But the weather has her feeling adventurous, so she decides on a slow stroll down the sidewalk, taking advantage of the dry, crisp air and warm sun. That is before she spots him.

She's barely made it a few feet when she sees Jim Hopper a block or two away. He's walking in her direction but seems unaware of everything around him, a few people stopping to gawk and whisper once he passes them.

Joyce quickly turns around and gets in her car. She's stumbled upon the bridge but wasn't prepared to cross it at all, suddenly afraid of heights. What are the rules for giving condolences to someone you haven't spoken to in over ten years? *Hey, Hopper. Sorry your whole world came crashing down. Welcome back.*

His long legs bring him from point A to point B in no time and he's passing in front of Joyce's car. Just like everyone else, Hopper has aged. He's not as fit as he once was and his hair is thinning, but he's still Hopper.

He's thrown a blue flannel over a white shirt, his jeans worn and faded. The buttons on the end of his sleeves are undone, the fabric splayed wide and falling down his arms when he brings his hands up to scrub his face, unruly facial hair different from the clean shaven man she once knew.

Joyce's nerves feel exposed watching him from the car. He's right there in front of her and he doesn't know it. Doesn't know what car she drives. And hasn't looked into the windshield to see she's staring directly at him.

Hopper hastily turns and grips the handle of the door to Melvald's and Joyce lets out a small gasp. If she hadn't taken her break early, she would probably be speaking with him right this moment. But he seems frozen, like his body acted without consulting his brain and now he doesn't know what to do.

His hand drops from the door and runs through his hair, practically tearing at it before Hopper continues down the sidewalk, disappearing in an instant.

Joyce realizes she was subconsciously gripping the door handle. Maybe she did want to speak to him. Step out of the car, try and fail to express her sadness for him and his family, and offer to help in any way she can.

He had to have come to the store for a reason, one that might have been as simple as buying a pack of smokes. She watched as a mini episode of inner turmoil played out in front of her and then he was gone. Part of her wonders if maybe he wanted to speak to her too, if he was seeking her out. But that was silly of her. After all these years, she probably didn't even cross his mind.